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Cops Across The US Have Been Exposed Posting Racist And Violent Things On Facebook. Here's The Proof.

A review of the Facebook accounts of thousands of officers around the US — the largest database of its kind — found officers endorsing violence against Muslims, women, and criminal defendants.



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Reporting
From
Chicago

Last updated on July 23, 2019, at 3:32 p.m. ET

Posted on June 1, 2019, at 8:56 a.m. ET

This article was published in collaboration with Injustice Watch, a nonprofit newsroom focused on exposing institutional failures that obstruct justice and equality.

CHICAGO — When an armed, would-be robber backed out of a liquor store after the clerk pulled a gun on him, the surveillance video was posted on Facebook with a comment: “Should have shot him.”

Another commenter responded, “I would of pulled the trigger.”

These comments weren’t from your everyday Facebook users. They were the words of Philadelphia police officers.

Local law enforcement departments across the country have grappled with officers’ use of social media, often struggling to create and enforce policies that restrict offensive speech.

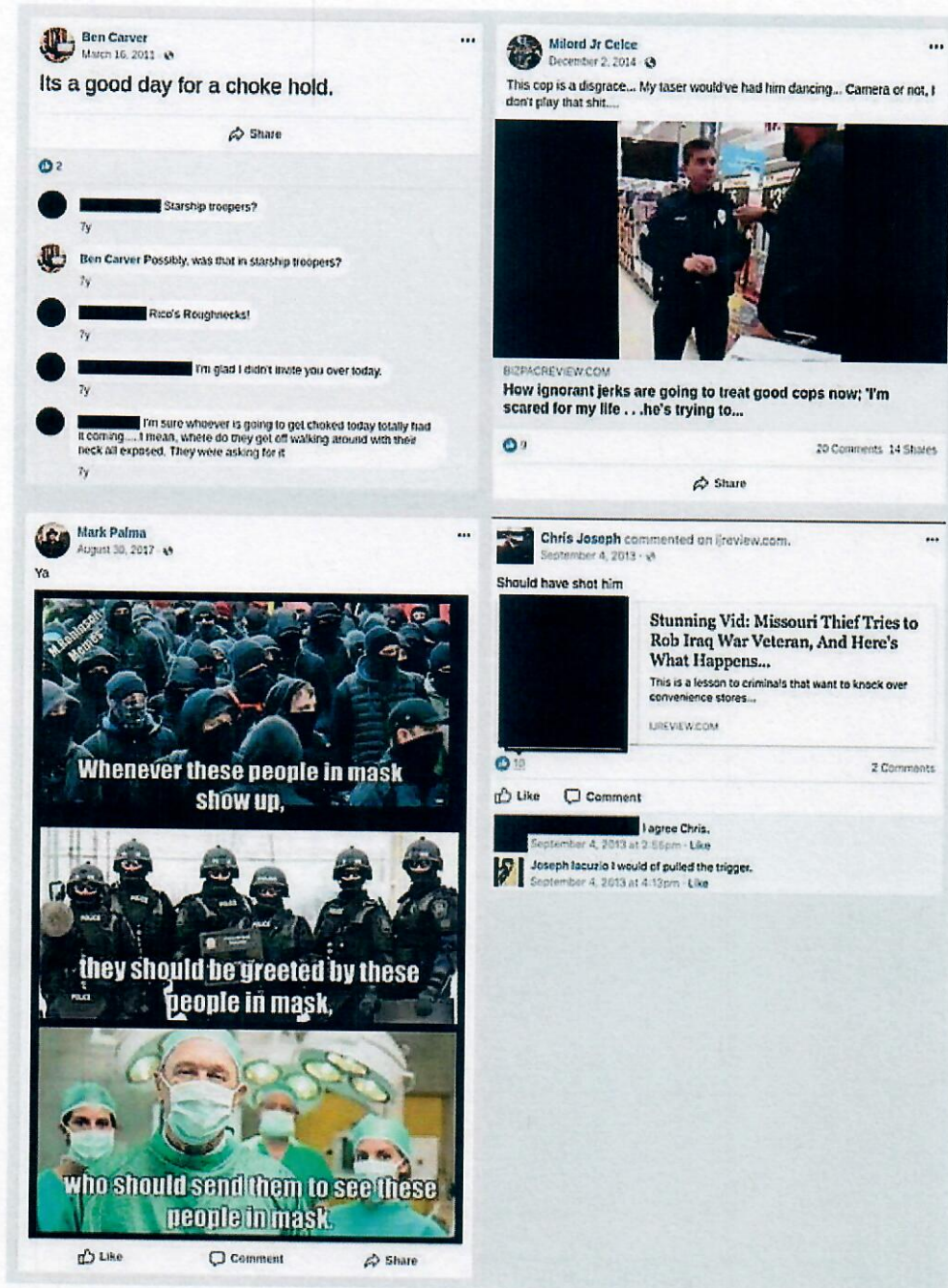
The North Charleston, South Carolina, police department fired an officer for posting a photo of himself wearing Confederate flag underwear, days after a white supremacist killed nine black worshippers at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church just miles away. He later settled a wrongful termination suit.

The Chicago Police Department has tried unsuccessfully to fire an officer whose own commander complained of his “bigoted views.” A Facebook page called Chicago Code Blue attracted attention for inflammatory comments — such as “Every Thug Deserves a Slug” — after an officer was found guilty in the death of Laquan McDonald.

Police officers saying bigoted and racist things online has been an issue since the beginning of social media. The behavior was especially scrutinized after the Black Lives Matter movement blasted into the national conversation — and that scrutiny has continued even after that movement began grappling with its future. What was never really captured was the scope of problematic online posts from police officers.

But a new review of police behavior on Facebook documents the systemic nature of the conduct across several departments. The Plain View Project, launched by Philadelphia lawyer Emily Baker-White, examined the accounts of about 2,900 officers from eight departments across the country and an additional 600 retired officers from those same departments. She compiled posts that represented troubling conduct in a database that is replete with racist imagery and memes, and in some cases long, vitriolic exchanges involving multiple officers.

The project sought to compile posts, comments, and other public activity that could undermine public trust in the police and reinforce the views of critics, especially in minority communities, that the police are not there to protect them.



Various screenshots compiled by Plain View.

Facebook

Of the pages of officers whom the Plain View researchers could positively identify, about 1 in 5 of the current officers, and 2 in 5 of the retired officers, made public posts or comments that met that threshold — typically by displaying bias, applauding violence, scoffing at due process, or using dehumanizing language. The officers mocked Mexicans, women, and black people, celebrated the Confederate flag, and showed a man wearing a kaffiyeh scarf in the crosshairs of a gun.

“Just another savage that needs to be exterminated,” wrote Booker Smith Jr., a Dallas police sergeant, about a homicide at a Dollar General store. “Execute all involved,” he wrote separately about a group of teens who were accused of killing a 6-year-old. (One defendant pleaded guilty to aiding in the kidnapping. The alleged shooter and another defendant’s trials are scheduled for later this year.)

Reuben Carver III, a Phoenix officer, proclaimed in a stand-alone post, “Its a good day for a choke hold.”

And in St. Louis, Officer Thomas Mabrey shared a false news report that distorted an incident in which a woman police officer was shot responding to a call from a Moroccan man in Lebanon, Ohio. “F these muslim turd goat humpers,” he wrote, one of numerous anti-Muslim posts.

The officers named in this article did not respond to attempts to contact them or declined to comment.

When contacted about the findings of the Plain View Project, some departments requested more details about the flagged posts. The Phoenix Police Department said it had opened an inquiry into Carver's post, and submitted it to the Professional Standards Bureau for review. The same officer also made posts threatening lawbreakers with sexual assault and celebrating violence against "hippies."

A spokesperson with the St. Louis police department said they had forwarded the information regarding the post disparaging Muslims to their Internal Affairs division. A spokesperson with the Dallas Police Department said they had forwarded Smith's details to superiors for review.

Still, experts in race and criminal justice were alarmed at the data.

"This blows up the myth of bad apples, by the sheer number of images and numbers of individuals who are implicated," said Nikki Jones, an associate professor of African American studies at the University of California, Berkeley.

David Kennedy, a criminology professor at John Jay College, said he considered the results "dire."

"This is the kind of behavior that confirms the worst suspicions on the part of communities about the police," Kennedy said, adding that it "fuels and cements" the convictions of people in distressed communities have that the "police are not to be trusted."

Still others said some posts need to be taken in the context of the job.

Peter Moskos, a sociologist and former Baltimore police officer, argued that among the police rank and file, such comments may just be expressions of officers who recognize the dangers of the profession.

"I think a lot of that language serves a purpose," Moskos said. It implies, "We're all in this together."



Various screenshots compiled by Plain View.

Facebook

Moskos, who now is an associate professor in the Department of Law, Police Science, and Criminal Justice Administration at John Jay College, said that

some of what officers say is likely hyperbole — a way of signaling to colleagues that an officer is not a coward and will have their partner's back when a dangerous situation erupts.

The Plain View Project used department rosters to search for Facebook pages for every officer in Phoenix; St. Louis; Philadelphia; Dallas; York, Pennsylvania; Twin Falls, Idaho; Denison, Texas; and Lake County, Florida. The locations were chosen to achieve a range of geography and size.

The troubling posts were not limited to the large departments. In Lake County, Florida, Sheriff's Deputy Jason Williams shared a meme, along with the comment "love this!!!!!!" depicting a semitruck smeared with blood with the caption "JUST DROVE THROUGH ARIZONA/DIDN'T SEE ANY PROTESTERS." The department is now investigating.

Another sheriff's deputy, Cpl. Robert Bedgood, posted a photo of a vehicle with a decal reading "1-800-CHOKE-DAT-HOE," with the comment "my new motto." In a comment below the photo, he wrote "A choke, is the new; i love you." Bedgood declined to comment to reporters about the post.

The project was able to identify about 1 in 5 of the roughly 14,400 officers on the rosters through a combination of profile name, URLs, photographs,

badge numbers, and other identifying information. Many officers could not be included because they had common names or used nicknames, their profiles were private, or they did not have a Facebook profile.

But that still left an avalanche of problematic posts.

In Philadelphia, which has roughly 6,600 officers, the Plain View Project identified 1,073 on Facebook, about a third of whom had made troubling posts or comments.

The Plain View Project shared its research with Injustice Watch, a Chicago-based nonprofit newsroom, which discovered many officers who made offensive posts were also accused of brutality or civil rights violations. Of 327 officers in Philadelphia who posted troubling content, more than a third — 138 officers — appeared to have had one or more federal civil rights lawsuits filed against them, based on name, badge number, and other corroborating details. Of that group, 99 ended in settlements or verdicts against them or the city.

The Facebook posts were not specifically connected to incidents that were the subject of lawsuits, though in some cases the officers were supporting conduct, like using Tasers to subdue suspects, that could mirror the kind of conduct raised in complaints.

Philadelphia Officer Christian Fenico, who appears on Facebook under the name Chris Joseph and posted the “should have shot him” comment in September 2013, has twice been accused of excessive and unprovoked force. In both cases, men claimed that he choked them. Both lawsuits ended in payments by the city to settle the claims.

In late 2013, Fenico shared an article from a now-defunct website that detailed examples of sensational events, whether real or not.

The article, which seems to have been taken down, referenced a handcuffed teen whose face was injured after police used a Taser. “Who cares,” he wrote, “kid and mom are scumbags. Good job police.”

In a post about refugees, he wrote, “Let them starve to death. I hate every last one of them.”

The city paid \$110,000 to settle a case brought by a man who said Fenico came to his home responding to a call and then beat him, breaking his nose, and choking him to unconsciousness even after his partner tried to pull him away, saying, “that’s enough,” the lawsuit said.

Another man’s lawsuit described the trouble that ensued after the family called police to report that a driver had hit a family member’s car and then

attempted to flee. Fenico, one of the officers who responded to the call, ended up in an argument during which Fenico pointed his gun at the man, threatened to shoot him, and punched and choked him until he lost consciousness, according to the lawsuit. The man received \$5,000.

Also in Philadelphia, Officer Robert Oakes appeared to belittle domestic abuse, writing, "Oh baby, oh baby, PLEASE DONT!!!! stop!!!! resisting!!!!" and "no means yes!!!! They just don't know it...."

Various screenshots compiled by Plain View.

Facebook

The city paid \$42,500 to settle two lawsuits that said Oakes had assaulted Philadelphia residents; neither of the suits claimed sexual misconduct or domestic abuse. In one, Oakes and another officer, working undercover, were accused of stopping a man as he

walked down the street and assaulting him. In the other, Oakes was among a group of officers accused of assaulting a man who observed a police incident and attempted to record it.

The offensive posts were not just by the rank and file. At least 64 of the Philadelphia officers have leadership roles, serving as corporals, sergeants, lieutenants, captains, or inspectors, according to an employment roster from January.

Jim Bueermann, a former police chief in Redlands, California, who recently retired as president of the Police Foundation, said supervisors establish behavioral norms for the rank and file: “You pay sergeants to be leaders, you pay them to uphold the values of the organization, and to demand constitutionally correct behavior that is in alignment with the organizational values.”

Sgt. Mark Palma reposted a meme disparaging people of Middle Eastern descent and called protesters who appeared at an officer’s home after a shooting “scum.” Since 2012, the city has paid out \$977,500 to settle five lawsuits that were filed against the City of Philadelphia, Sgt. Palma, and members of his squad.

Sgt. Michael Melvin, who goes by Michael Vincent on Facebook, posted a photo in 2015 mocking the Black Lives Matter movement.

The image showed a large bulletin board adorned with printouts of dogs with handwritten captions. “Hands up don’t shoot,” one heading read, next to a dog with its paws in the air. “Dog lives matter.” The other, an image of a dog with her puppies, read, “Now who gonna feed my babies.”

Melvin was accused of being part of a cover-up in a wrongful death lawsuit that the city settled last November for \$195,000.

Philadelphia, Dallas, and Phoenix have social media policies that prohibit off-duty employees from posting content that is biased or discriminatory. Court rulings permit bans on potentially harmful speech such as threats and bigotry by public employees.

Injustice Watch questioned the Philadelphia Police Department about several of the posts in February, providing the names of seven officers. The department said that in response it had opened an investigation.

“We have reviewed the social media transcriptions you provided, and find many of them to be not only incongruent with our standards and policies, but also troubling on a human level,” Commissioner Richard Ross said in a statement.

According to a federal lawsuit, Officer Milord Celce Jr. responded to a report of a verbal dispute in May 2013. He told one person present, Laketa Wanamaker, that someone was going to jail, and used his Taser on her multiple times, the suit said.

“They charged her with not one single crime,” said the woman’s lawyer, Alan Denenberg. “How do they justify using a Taser which is three, four steps up on the use-of-force continuum?”

The city agreed to a \$25,000 settlement.

A year and a half after the incident, Celce posted an article that featured an officer showing restraint when a customer would not show a store receipt. Celce was not impressed:

“This cop is a disgrace...” Celce wrote. “My taser would’ve had him dancing.”

The lawsuits involving five officers cost Philadelphia more than \$1.3 million, not including settlements for undisclosed amounts.

In November 2017, Palma — who reposted a racist meme and called protesters “scum” — referenced a philly.com article that detailed complaints that an officer, whose profile picture showed her in uniform, had posted inflammatory comments online. The post

was about the proposed removal of a statue of former Philadelphia mayor Frank Rizzo over his treatment of black and Latino communities. The officer called one commenter a “ghetto ass” and mocked black vernacular speech.

“The Media is watching what we put on Facebook,” Palma warned.

Days later, most of his Facebook posts became private.



Opening illustration by BuzzFeed News

CORRECTION

July 23, 2019, at 3:30 p.m.

The numbers in a paragraph about the Philadelphia Police Department have been adjusted to reflect the Plain View Project's removal of an officer who had been inaccurately included in its database.



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TOPICS IN THIS ARTICLE

Facebook



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